PRINCE GEORGE SCHOOL DISTRICT REVIEW

December 8 – 11, 2002

School District Name: Prince George

Superintendent: Dick Chambers

Dates of Visit by District Review Team: December 8 – 11, 2002

District Review Team: Terri Watson, Lorna Williams, Elaine Thompson, Sonia Hutson, Mike McAvoy, Gloria Metzger, Tom Elliott and Robin Brayne (Chairperson)

SUMMARY OF PROCESS

The Prince George School District Review is one of the three reviews being voluntarily undertaken to field-test the draft materials and refine procedures for School District Reviews.

The purposes of a School District Review are to:

- Review school district and school achievement data
- Review the school district performance plans (accountability contracts) and school plans to improve student achievement
- Determine the capacity of the school district to support schools in improving student achievement
- Make recommendations to the school district and to the minister about improving student achievement
- Identify promising practices that might assist other school districts and schools in plans to improve student achievement

The School District Review Team, in addressing the above purposes reviewed the following:

- Processes whereby the goals, objectives and targets set out in the District plan and school plans were determined
- Progress of the school district and selected schools with respect to improvement targets, noting particular strengths
- School district strategies used to support the District plan and the supports provided to schools
- Coherence between the District plan and selected school plans

The School District Review Team met with school district senior administrators and curriculum and instruction district staff to review elements of the district plan for

improving student achievement. The Team met with trustees. Team representatives met with executive members of the School District Parent Advisory Committee.

The Team visited 16 schools selected by the school district and by the ministry of education, for approximately two hours. The schools were: Ron Brent, Blackburn, College Heights Secondary, Harwin, Pinewood, Austin Road, Carney Hill, Hart Highlands, D.P. Todd, Duchess Park, Heather Park, Vanway, Valemount, Valemount Secondary, Dunster Fine Arts and McBride Elementary. The purpose of the meetings was to review, with the principal, vice principal, teacher representatives and parent representatives, the elements of school plans for improving student achievement.

The Team provided a de-briefing to School District senior administration and curriculum and instruction leadership staff at the conclusion of its review and visit to Prince George. The chairperson of the District Review Team and the Superintendent met with the Board Chairperson. The chairperson of the District Review Team, accompanied by the Board Chairperson and Superintendent, met with representatives of the Prince George media, provided a statement and responded to questions.

The Team was very appreciative of the comprehensive data provided and the welcome it received at each of its visits. The Team was impressed with how student achievement data was organized and the willingness of all to provide and respond to any information and questions. The Team noted the "spirit of inquiry" at the schools and the willingness of school and School District personnel to seek advice and feedback on practices and strategy. The Team was grateful for the timely technology support in the preparation of the draft report.

OBSERVATIONS IN KEY AREAS:

Following the review of all information provided, a meeting with school district staff and visits to a sampling of schools, the Team respectfully offers the following general observations and comments concerning plans for improving student achievement.

Clarity and relevance of goals in district plans for improving student achievement:

- District improvement goals pertaining to literacy and numeracy are related to student achievement
- District improvement goals related to literacy and numeracy are supported by student achievement data
- Consider removing "integrate technology across the curriculum to improve student learning" as a goal and incorporating it and its associated objectives and strategies into strategies supporting other goals
- Consider broadening the strategies for the goal of "safe schools" to provide schools with greater autonomy to achieve safe and caring school environments
- Consider replacing the goal of "providing a variety of pathways" with the goal of increasing school completion and retention rates and include providing a variety of pathways and providing for more choice among the strategies for achieving the goal

- The number of goals, objectives and strategies in the District plan for improving student achievement are ambitious and, without coordination, animating the plan may challenge the school district's resources/capacity to sufficiently support all strategies

Rationale for the selection of goals:

- The goals are linked to *School District Directions* set out for 2002/03
- Schools are moving toward basing the selection of goals for improving student achievement on a review of provincial, school and district achievement data
- The schools visited were able to articulate clearly the basis or rationale for each of the school goals for improving student achievement
- There appeared to be less understanding in the schools of the basis and rationale for the goals contained in the District plan for improving student achievement
- Though aware of goals, there is little evidence of how the parent community and representatives of specific groups (e.g. *Aboriginal Education Board*) are involved in the determination, at the outset, of goals for improving student achievement

Strategies used to achieve goals:

There is a clear instructional focus and emphasis throughout the school district, described by many as being modeled by the Superintendent, which is reflected in ambitious school district and school plans for improving student achievement.

- Throughout the school district, there is vast array of strategies and projects identified and directed at influencing and supporting instructional practice
- There is technical and consultative support at the district level to support school and district plans for improving student achievement
- Some of the strategies associated with goals for improving student achievement, though worthy, clearly described and having advocates, do not always align with the selected school district goals for improving student achievement
- The capacity of the *District Leadership Team* to work collaboratively in supporting school goals for improving student achievement is developing well

Use of provincial, school and school district data in the determination of goals and the monitoring of progress:

- Throughout the school district is a growing recognition of the importance and usefulness of achievement data - provincial, district and school level - in developing goals for improving student achievement and tracking progress on an ongoing basis
- There has been considerable investment in an impressive system (OPTS) for the collection, storage, management and display of provincial, school district and school data, which should be used to its full potential
- The use of action research, dissemination of information about best practices and the use of data to inform priorities and practice is evolving

- The school district and schools possess powerful and useful/relevant performance data and encouragement of its use to inform priorities for improving achievement and informing practice is a developing strength

School district structures and supports for improvement of achievement:

- The school district is very proactive and supportive, as exemplified by the *Literacy 57 Reading Project*, of efforts by schools to improve student achievement
- School district and school leadership is committed to assigning the highest priority to curriculum and instruction in order to improve student achievement
- There are many opportunities for schools, if so inclined, to take advantage of most school district supports
- Though well-served by consultant staff, the school communities in areas remote to Prince George have an inequitable opportunity to take advantage of many district in-service and networking opportunities.
- The school district recognizes the importance of building the leadership capacity of school principals in the implementation of school plans and building teacher leadership capacity is seen as a priority in the District
- The school district is explicit in how it allocates resources to support school district and school goals for improving student achievement
- The number of school district initiatives, projects and available supports for interested schools and teachers are considerable and impressive
- Structures and strategies for improving the achievement of Aboriginal students, set out in *Aboriginal Education Plans*, need to be more clearly aligned and integrated with District and school goals for improving student achievement

Communication of goals and results:

- The school district has a good relationship with local media and uses it effectively to communicate its student achievement data
- The school district is continuing to seek and find ways of communicating its goals for improving student achievement and its accomplishments to its various communities
- There is not yet an explicit communication plan for presenting school district plans for improving student achievement and for presenting progress reports
- Schools have well-established mechanisms for communicating school goals for improving student achievement and progress results and reports to the school community

Partnerships – relationship of district plan to school plans (coherence):

- There is value placed on the importance of school district directions and expectations for improving student achievement and on the importance of school plans to reflect school uniqueness
- School district goals and school plans, while consistent, do not appear yet to be as explicitly connected as they might be in a comprehensive, focussed and sustained school district plan for improving student achievement

Partnerships – parent participation in district plan and school plans:

- The team noted the strong, positive and trusting relationships between schools and parent communities and the potential of these relationships for ongoing partnerships
- In some instances, the school is seen as the focal point and integral part of the community
- Schools will benefit from the input provided by *School Planning Councils*, the *Aboriginal Education Board*, and other groups with special interests in the development of future and ongoing plans for improving student achievement
- The district and schools will benefit from an inclusive and collaborative approach to the review of progress to date and the development of future goals and strategies for improving student achievement

STRENGTHS

Prince George is a large school district with many unique opportunities and challenges. It has many strengths. They include:

- A "can do" attitude to overcoming obstacles imposed by declining enrolment, budget restrictions, and geography and to meeting the challenges of providing opportunities for all students to experience success at school
- A variety of educational programs and supports to accommodate a wide range of student interests, needs, and educational requirements
- A strong *School District Directions Statement* which provides for a well-defined, well-organized and focussed plans, at the school district and school level, for improving student achievement and for allocating resources
- A commitment to curriculum and instruction and to the well-being of students, modeled by strong school district curriculum leadership
- A consistent format for describing school plans, representing baseline data, noting improvement targets and setting out adjustments to strategies
- A commitment to improving practices, learning from experience and from others, building on strengths, and supporting best practices as evidenced by a strong culture of professional development, networking and action research

PROMISING PRACTICES

The District Review Team identified a number of promising practices in the Prince George School District that might assist other school districts and schools in their efforts to improve student achievement. Promising practices observed include:

- The school district's *Organizational Performance Tracking System* (OPTS) that supports the district-wide collection and tracking of data used by schools in establishing goals, targets and performance measures
- The comprehensive training *School Planning Council Handbook* prepared for supporting the introduction and success of School Planning Councils

- An active School District *Student Advisory Council*
- An *Aboriginal Education Board*, representing all aboriginal communities and having decision-making authority respecting support for schools, can be a significant and helpful influence in setting school and district achievement goals and targets
- School District-normed curriculum based measures in literacy and numeracy
- The Problem Solving Performance Standards rubric used as a strategy to support the goal of improving problem-solving skills of students at the intermediate level
- The *Area Resource Committee* (ARC) that provides short term support for students with behavior and learning issues
- The processes, including the structure and format of documentation prepared at the school district and school level, whereby the school district prepared for the *School District Review*
- The *IEP Parent Mentorship Program*
- Parent support material, developed and distributed by the School District and schools, to enhance home reading program
- The *Literacy 57 Reading Project*

RECOMMENDATIONS

It was evident to the Team that there is a culture of always looking for new ideas and seeking suggestions to improve practice. In this spirit, the Team offers the following recommendations:

- Provide opportunities for networking and sharing effective practice among school communities, particularly in areas remote to Prince George
- Use technology (video conferencing) to enhance the connectedness of remote school communities to enable staff and parent participation in district processes
- Look at creative ways to provide opportunities for collaboration and networking (i.e. changes to school calendar, offering summer institutes)
- Ensure the meaningful involvement in decision-making of all partner groups at the school and district level
- Continue the spirit and development of team work and collaboration among school district curriculum and instruction personnel
- Work in closer partnership with the *Aboriginal Education Board* for the development of goals and strategies to address aboriginal education goals and objectives
- Develop a greater connection of school *Aboriginal Education Plans* and school plans to ensure shared responsibility
- Develop greater knowledge and understanding at the school level of the strategies set out in the District Plan for improving strategies